

LANGUAGE DESCRIPTIONS

Lesson Objectives:

At the end of this lesson, you are expected to:

- a. give a brief outline of the various ideas about language that have influenced ESP in some way;
- b. answers the grammatical exercise, identify six main stages of development; and
- c. Critically evaluate their influence or value in ESP.

Hello Learners! In this lesson, we will learn that any ESP course uses explicit or implicit ideas about language nature. These ideas are drawn from the various language descriptions that have been developed by succeeding schools of thought in Linguistics. We now have several ways of describing language available to us. Therefore, it is essential to understand each of these descriptions' main features to consider how they can be used most appropriately in ESP courses. Good luck and Enjoy!

ABSTRACTION

They have been a sumptuous feast of language and stolen the scraps.

(Shakespeare: Love's Labour's Lost)

Any ESP course makes use of explicit or implicit ideas about the nature of language. These ideas are drawn from the various language descriptions that have been developed by succeeding schools of thought in Linguistics. We now have several ways of describing language available to us. Therefore, it is important to understand the main features of each of these descriptions to consider how they can be used most appropriately in ESP courses.

SIX MAIN STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

I Classical or Traditional Grammar

Descriptions of English and other languages were based on the grammars of the classical languages, Greek and Latin. These descriptions were based on an analysis of the role played by each word in the sentence. The language was described in this way because the classical languages were case-based languages where the grammatical function of each word in the sentence was made apparent by the use of appropriate inflections. Thus, the form of a word would change according to whether it was a subject, object, indirect object, and so on.

Since ESP emerged after the classical form of description had been largely abandoned, its influence on ESP has never been strong. Nevertheless, it has continued to provide the teacher with a useful indirect source of guidance.

Teachers who wish to maintain a balanced view of linguistics should not overlook the fact that traditional grammar has many useful virtues. The traditional handbook provided an array of terms and distinctions, which most of us used in learning to talk about our language and which many people continue to find serviceable throughout their lives. Thus, a knowledge of the classical descriptions can still deepen our understanding of how languages operate.

▮ **Structural Linguistics**

The first real challenge to the classical description of languages came in the 1930s with the advent of structuralism, associated with linguists such as Leonardo Bloomfield (1935). The structural or 'slot and filler' form of language description will be familiar to most language teachers due to the enormous influence it has had on language teaching since the Second World War.

Peculiarities

1. The language's grammar is described in terms of syntagmatic structures that carry the fundamental propositions (Statement, interrogative, negative, imperative) and notions (time, number, gender). By varying words with these structural frameworks, sentences with different meanings can be generated.
2. With the help of the structural linguistic, the structural syllabus was created. In such a syllabus, items are graded, so that simpler and more immediately useable structures precede the more complex ones.

Examples: ESP syllabus based on structural principals

1. Simple present active
2. Simple present passive
3. Simple present passive and active
4. -ing forms
5. Present Perfect; Present Continuous
6. Infinitives
7. Anomalous Finite
8. Past Perfect

At its best, the structural syllabus provides the learners with a systematic description of the generative core of the language, the finite range of structures that make it possible to generate an infinite number of novel utterances. For this reason, the structural syllabus continues to be widely used despite criticism for advocates of functional, notional, or use-based descriptions of English.

▮ **Transformative Generative (TG) Grammar**

The structural view of language as a collection of syntagmatic patterns held sway until the publication in 1957 of ***Syntactic Structures*** by Noam Chomsky. Chomsky argued that the structural description was too superficial because it only described the surface structure of the language and could not explain relationships of meaning that were quite clearly there but which were not realized in the surface structure. Therefore these two sentences:

1. Bea is easy to please.
2. Bea is eager to please.

Would, according to a structural description, indicate the same relationship between the words in the sentence. Still, obviously, the relationship is not the same: in the first sentence, Bea is the receiver of pleasing, while in the second, she is doing the inviting. Similarly, the identity of meaning between an active and passive sentence would not be shown.

Chomsky concluded that these problems arose because the language was being analyzed and described in isolation from the human mind which produces it. He maintained that if we want to understand how language works, it cannot be viewed as a phenomenon in itself. It must be

considered to be a reflection of human thought patterns. He proposed that there must be two levels of meaning:

- 1. *Deep level*, which is concerned with the organization of thoughts.
- 2. *Surface level*, where these thoughts are expressed through the syntax of the language.

Therefore, the grammar of the language is not the surface structures themselves but the rules that enable the language used to generate the surface structures from the deep level of meaning.

Chomsky's work had an enormous and direct influence on the world of Linguistics. He re-established the idea that language is rule-governed. He widened the view of language to incorporate the relationship between meaning and form. For ESP, the most important lesson to be drawn from Chomsky's work was the distinction between performance (i.e., the surface structures) and competence (i.e., the deep level rule). Chomsky's definition of performance and competence was narrowly based, being concerned only with syntax. In ESP, we need to take a much broader view, but the primary distinction is still valid.

▮ **Language Variation and Register Analysis**

Consider these two texts.

Text A

Now I have to change to the final size drill I require, which is three-quarters of an inch diameter, and this is called a Morse-taper sleeve.

A slower speed for a large drill.

Nice even feed should give a reasonable finish to the hole.

Applying coolant periodically. This is mainly for lubrication rather than cooling.

Almost to the depth now.

Right. Withdrawing the drill.

Text B

- 1 Select required drill.
- 2 Mount drill in tailstock. Use taper sleeves as necessary.
- 3 Set speed and start machine spindle.
- 4 Position tailstock to workpiece.
- 5 Apply firm even pressure to tailstock hand wheel to feed drill into workpiece.
- 6 Apply coolant frequently
- 7 Drill hole to depth
- 8 Withdraw drill
- 9 Stop machine

(Hutchinson and Waters, 1981)

The illocutionary force of these two texts is the same: to say, they are both conveying the same message, and they both have the same purpose, namely to give instructions in carrying out the particular job. But the language of text A differs from that of text B in several significant ways. Language then varies according to the context of use, and it is this fact that enables us to distinguish, for example, formal from informal, written from the spoken, self-sufficient language from context-dependent.

The concept of language variation gives rise to the type of ESP, that was based on register analysis. If language varies according to text, it was argued. It should be possible to identify the kind of language associated with a specific context, such as an area of knowledge. (Legal Eng., social Eng., Medical Eng., Business Eng., etc.), or an area of use (technical manuals, academic texts, business meetings, advertisements, doctor-patient communication, etc.).

▮ **Functional/Notional Grammar**

Functions are concerned with social behavior and represent the speaker or writer's intention, for example, advising, warning, threatening, describing, etc. It is equated with the communicative acts that are carried out through language.

Notions reflected how the human mind thinks. They are categories into which the mind and language divide reality, for example, time, frequency, duration, gender, number, location, quantity, quality, etc.

The move towards a functionally based syllabus has been solid in ESP development, mainly on the pragmatic grounds that the majority of ESP students have already done a structurally organized syllabus, probably at school. Their needs, therefore, are not to learn the basic grammar but rather to learn how to use the knowledge they already have.

The functional syllabus's attractive is that it appears to be based on language in use, in contrast to the structural syllabus, which shows the only form.

Structure + Context= Function

The functional syllabus, however, has its drawback. It suffers in particular from a lack of systematic conceptual framework, and as such does not help the learners organize their knowledge of the language.

▮ **Discourse (Rhetorical) Analysis**

This next development has also had a profound effect on ESP. The emphasis moved to look at how meaning is generated between sentences. In this, the context of the sentence is essential in creating the definition.

If we take this simple sentence: 'It is raining,' and put it into three different dialogues, we can see how the meaning changes.

- Can I go out to play?
It's raining.
- Have you cut the grass yet?
It's raining
- I think I'll go out for a walk.
It's raining.

In each case, the propositional meaning (statement) of the sentences is the same. The notions in it are also the same (present time, neuter). But the sentence is fulfilling three different communicative purposes.

The meaning of this same sentence changes with the different contexts—this change was brought about by two factors.

1. Sociolinguistic context: who is speaking to whom and why. The meaning changes according to the relationship between participants in the dialogue and their reason for speaking.
2. The relative positions of the utterances within the discourse. A word acquires meaning by what reports it precedes or follows. We might call this the discourse meaning.

There are two ways that we can identify the results of studies into the nature of discourse that have been used in ESP teaching materials:

1. Learners are made aware of the stages in certain set-piece transactions associated with particular specialist fields.
2. The second use of discourse analysis in ESP has been through materials that aim to explain

how meaning is created by the sentences' relative positions in a written text. This has become the central feature of many ESP textbooks aimed at developing a knowledge of how sentences are combined in texts to produce a particular meaning (Allen and Widdowson, 1974). This approach has led, in particular, to the text-diagramming type of exercise found in many ESP materials. The ultimate aim of such an approach is to make the learners into more efficient readers by making them aware of the underlying structure of a text and how language has been organized to create this structure.s